

Martha Waters. Gender's Role in the Expression of Friendship in Young Adult Literature. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April, 2014. 53 pages. Advisor: Brian W. Sturm.

This content analysis of fourteen young adult novels examines the manner in which friendship behaviors and trends vary depending on the gender of the characters. Similarities and differences between male and female same-sex friendships in these novels were compared to determine the extent to which friendship patterns are determined by gender, and then the findings of the content analysis were compared to the trends observed in the psychology literature regarding gender and adolescent friendships. Results indicated that while psychology literature suggests many gender-based differences in friendship patterns, these differences are not actually reflected in the young adult novels being published today, which depict same-sex friendships as being largely similar in terms of the most significant trends.

Headings:

Content Analysis

Young Adult Literature

Teenagers

GENDER'S ROLE IN THE EXPRESSION OF FRIENDSHIP
IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by
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I. Introduction

The differences between male and female friendships among adolescents are the subject of numerous psychological studies; however, there is a surprising lack of research regarding friendship patterns among adolescent characters in young adult books. In light of the increase in popularity in young adult literature in recent years, much attention has been devoted to the romances that are found in these books, leading to the easy criticism that YA is characterized by “schlocky romance” (Crowe, 2001, p. 146). However, adolescent development research has time and time again emphasized the importance of friendships to the lives of teenagers and the manner in which they “contribute substantially to both social and cognitive development” (Hartup, 1993, p. 3), and in my reading I have frequently encountered young adult novels with impressively close same-sex friendships, with characters going so far as to emphasize the importance of these friendships above everything else—including romance.

I am particularly interested in the manner in which these friendships are affected by gender. I am also interested in the differences that might exist between actual teenage friendships and those depicted in books; as a future librarian, I am interested in determining the extent to which the books I recommend for teenage patrons reflect the reality of their own lives. Das (2013) notes that “children...[draw] parallels between relationships in their own lives and those they read about or view” (p. 458), and for this reason I am intrigued by the question of what similarities and differences teenage readers

might note between their own friendships and fictional ones. The purpose of this study is to better understand the manner in which same-sex friendships are shaped by the gender of the participants—are male and female friendships portrayed in books entirely different from one another, or are there some similarities? As Dutro (2002) notes, both genders “tend to categorize books in highly gendered ways” (p. 381)—is the gap between “boy books” and “girl books” reflected in the behavior of the characters? Overall, does the gender of the friends cause so many differences in behavior that male and female friendships of similar-aged characters seem largely unlike?

With these questions in mind, this paper will attempt to determine the extent to which gender plays a role in the expression of friendship in young adult literature, and to compare these findings with the research that has been conducted regarding teenage friendships in the real world. I examine both the scholarly literature and the young adult novels in search of friendship trends broken down by gender, and I compare the scholarly and literary trends to one another in an attempt to determine to what extent recent young adult fiction is reflecting the reality of the relationships that teenagers are experiencing in their own lives.

II. Literature Review

Differences in male and female friendship habits are well-documented throughout the psychology literature, and the literature indicates that these differences grow increasingly pronounced as children enter and progress through adolescence. Researchers have observed that “there is a significant trend for same-sex companionship to increase with age” (Erwin, 1994, p. xi) as these differences manifest themselves and children increasingly turn away from the opposite gender when seeking friendships. Indeed, as children age, “most cliques are homogeneous with respect to sex” (Hallinan, 1980, p. 338). So what, precisely, are the differences—and similarities—that have been observed among adolescent same-sex friend groups?

Differences

A great deal of research involving gender and friendship has centered on the notion that, as Auckett, Ritchie, and Mill (1988) put it, “women [emphasize] talking, emotional sharing, and discussing personal problems...and men [show] an emphasis on sharing activities” (p. 56). The researchers found that females “place a higher intrinsic value on the interaction process itself” (p. 59), and therefore find the emphasis on shared activities that is found in male friendships to be unnecessary to their satisfaction. Since girls are more likely to engage in self-disclosure, they frequently experience greater “feelings of closeness and support from friends” (Azmitia, Ittel & Radmacher, 2005, p. 24). When girls are with their friends, they tend to “joke, confide of loves or hoped-for-

affairs, compare clothing, relax, tease each other, and just talk” (Savin-Williams, 1980, p. 352-353), while boys “[prefer] activities to talking” (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982, p. 731) and are more likely to “suppress feminine qualities or any thoughts, feelings, or desires that might lead others to question their masculinity” (Chu, 2005, p. 13). Furthermore, there is a growing body of research that indicates that while males may *wish* for friendships that include the emotional closeness of female friendships, they feel trapped within a “peer group culture” that reinforces masculine norms of behavior (Chu, 2005). When asked in one study about whether they discussed their emotions with their friends, many boys “said that disclosing feelings would lead to ridicule” (Oransky & Maracek, 2009, p. 227). While males may wish to be more disclosing to their same sex friends, they expect that emotional openness will come in their relationships with females—both platonic and romantic—rather than in their same sex friendships (Reisman, 1990). For this reason, females tend to express greater feelings of intimacy with their friends than males do (You & Morrison, 2000).

Furthermore, while the research indicates that males do seem to desire some of the relational orientation that characterizes female friendships, females show far less interest in the “skill orientation” of male friendships – the emphasis on performing activities and demonstrating accomplishments remains largely in the realm of male friendships (Azmitia, Ittel & Radmacher, 2005). And, indeed, this skill orientation can at times be the source of angst on the part of boys, since “similarities and differences in skills [are] closely associated with their experiences of friendship” (p. 32). Boys who feel that they have fewer skills than their friends often experience teasing as a result, and these boys experience distress at the perceived lower opinions of their friends.

On a related note, another interesting friendship trend, specifically relevant to adolescents, is the presence of narcissism. Zhou, Li, Zhang, and Zeng (2012) found that boys displayed higher levels of narcissism, while girls displayed the traits that the researchers described as “friendship qualities”, such as “validation and disclosure & communication” (p. 452). In other words, in their friendships, boys are more concerned with “maintain[ing] self worth” as opposed to girls, who wish “to obtain closeness with others” (p. 453). This is related to the idea, found in other research, that boys experience a “constant sense of being judged by [their] peer group” and feel the need to be on their guard to “shield [their] vulnerability” (Chu, 2005, p. 12). When asked about their friendships, boys have “emphasized that acting stoic, tough, and unfeeling is vital to a masculine image” (Oransky & Maracek, 2009, p. 225), and they are highly invested in preserving this image.

Another trend that has been observed among adolescent friends is the different structure of male friendships and male peer group interactions as opposed to female friendships. Male friend groups “tend to be...hierarchical” while female groups tend to be “more tightly interconnected” (Ackerman, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2007, p. 366) and “are more concerned with best friendships” (Underwood, 2007, p. 20). Horrocks (1976) observed that female friendships “are not usually as well organized as boys’...and they tend to operate without an identified leader” (p. 521-522). Males tend to “interact predominately in large structured groups” (p. 21), and within the power structure of these groups, the boys with the most “social power” are the ones who are most likely to have intimate same-sex friendships, since these are the boys least at risk of being labeled weak or effeminate (Way, 2013). The “conventions of masculinity in the United States that

emphasize autonomy and emotional stoicism” for boys mean that only those boys who are unafraid to “bend the rules of the ‘boy code’” can comfortably express emotion, and so those boys who are the most admired by their peers tend to be the ones who experience the freedom to express greater emotion with their friends (Way, 2013, p. 208-209).

Similarities

While much of the scholarly research on adolescent friendships focuses on the differences between the two genders, there are some similarities shared between males and females, too. Both genders consider similarity to their friends an important factor in friendship, as is proximity, to a lesser extent (Roberts-Griffin, 2011). Teens have verbalized the idea that “it’s important...to choose friends that share [their] values, ideas, and goals” as a “context for self-exploration” (Azmitia, Ittel, & Radmacher, 2005, p. 23). Furthermore, teens of both genders view “trust and loyalty as important ideals of friendship” and place a high value on friends who “are people you feel comfortable around” and who can be counted on “to be there for [them]” (p. 29). When asked to describe necessary friendship traits, “both younger and older adolescents always mention loyalty and commitment” (Hartup, 1993, p. 8). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, distrust of peers is commonly cited as an obstacle to the formation of close friendships in adolescence (Way, Gingold, Rotenberg & Kuriakose, 2005).

Additionally, regardless of gender, friendship is “a key source of experiences that support students’ sense of belonging in school” (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005, p. 62), and close friendships “affirm an individual’s sense of competence or value” (p. 63). Researchers have also found that teens frequently express the idea that friends can serve

as a “buffer against the stressful effects of family or peer problems” (p. 73) and that “friendships may be subjectively similar to kinships” (Ackerman, 2007, p. 365). Azmitia, Ittel, & Radmacher (2005) also addressed the issue of jealousy, which is largely ignored in much of the other psychology research, and they found that jealousy was common particularly in cases of “competition the adolescents experienced between old and new friends” (p. 35). Finally, there seems to be little evidence to support the idea that conflict resolution strategies are determined by gender. Hartup (1993) noted that “adolescents believe that friends have a special commitment to each other in managing conflicts” and that they “use negotiation rather than power assertion in managing their disagreements with friends” (p. 8), and Azmitia, Ittel, & Radmacher (2005) observed that “most early and late adolescents mentioned working through their conflicts as an important ideal of friendship” (p. 33). It seems to me that there was somewhat of a gap in this research, though—I would be interested in reading further articles examining in greater detail the exact methods of conflict resolution employed by the two genders.

To briefly summarize these broad trends, then, it is necessary to acknowledge that the individual trends interact with one another in a manner that helps to form a more complete understanding of gendered friendships. In short, same-sex male friendships are characterized by an unfulfilled desire for emotional intimacy that is suppressed for fear of appearing feminine; an emphasis on shared activities; emotional stoicism; a structured group hierarchy; an emphasis on maintaining self-worth within the aforementioned hierarchy; an emphasis on sharing similarities with friends; emphasis on friendship as a form of kinship; the ability to work through conflicts; distrust of peers; and, conversely, the placing of a high value on loyalty and the ability to trust one’s friends.

By contrast, same-sex female friendships are characterized by emotional openness; high levels of self-disclosure; open communication and lower levels of narcissism; tightly interconnected friend groups; an emphasis on sharing similarities with friends; an emphasis on friendship as a form of kinship; the ability to work through conflicts; and placing a high value on loyalty and the ability to trust one's friends. While there are clearly some shared friendship qualities, there are also extensive differences; these similarities and differences will be compared to the similarities and differences that I observed in the young adult novels I selected for analysis.

III. Methods

I analyzed fourteen young adult novels using latent content analysis to locate trends in friendship behaviors on the part of male and female characters. Babbie defines latent content analysis as the study of “the underlying meaning of communication”, which contrasts with manifest content analysis, or the searching of a document for “concrete terms” (2007, p. 325). Although the research conducted for my literature review gave me an idea of what trends I was likely to observe over the course of my reading, I did not determine a specific list of trends to search for ahead of time. Since I was interested in comparing the trends observed in the scholarly literature to the trends observed in the young adult novels, I felt that it was appropriate to use a similar method of trend identification within the novels as I used when doing my literature review. As I read the selected novels, I took note of the trends I observed within each book, and then at the conclusion of my reading, I compiled lists of the trends that appeared in three or more of the books for boys and for girls. I then compared the two lists, and was able to then make a final list of similarities and differences between the male and female friendships depicted in these novels.

To determine which young adult novels to analyze, I used a variety of selection sources. I first looked through YALSA’s annual list of Best Books for Young Adults (now renamed Best Fiction for Young Adults), and then consulted the Chapel Hill Public Library’s annual Best Books for Teens list. I then conducted a NoveList search of books aimed at grades 9-12 using the subject keyword “friendship”, and then finally, I searched

the Chapel Hill Public Library's catalog under the subject headings "male friendship fiction" and "female friendship fiction".

I compiled a preliminary list of titles through this combination of selection tools; in order to limit the search, I eliminated any books published before the year 2000, since I am primarily interested in recent trends in the literature. In cases where multiple titles within a series were suggested, I chose to read the first book in the series. Finally, I selected a convenience sample of books available in the teen room at the Chapel Hill Public Library. The final list of titles consists of fourteen young adult novels, half of which predominantly feature teenage female characters and the other half of which predominantly feature teenage male characters.

I selected the following books:

Alexie, S. (2007). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown.

Brashares, A. (2001). *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. New York: Delacorte.

Bray, L. (2003). *A Great and Terrible Beauty*. New York: Delacorte.

Carter, A. (2006). *I'd Tell You I Love You But Then I'd Have to Kill You*. New York: Hyperion.

Eulberg, E. (2010). *The Lonely Hearts Club*. New York: Point.

Gray, K. (2010). *Ostrich Boys*. New York: Random House.

Green, J. (2006). *An Abundance of Katherines*. New York: Dutton Books.

Hale, S. (2003). *The Goose Girl*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Hartinger, B. (2009). *Project Sweet Life*. New York: HarperTeen.

Hubbard, J. (2011). *Paper Covers Rock*. New York: Delacorte.

Oliver, L. (2010). *Before I Fall*. New York: Harper.

Silvey, C. (2011). *Jasper Jones*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Stiefvater, M. (2012). *The Raven Boys*. New York: Scholastic Press.

Von Ziegesar, C. (2002). *Gossip Girl*. Boston: Little, Brown.

IV. Analysis

A latent content analysis of the fourteen books selected revealed that, while there were certain differences evident in the patterns and trends common to male and female same-sex friendships, these differences were overall not as meaningful as might be expected. Of the patterns in friendship behaviors identified across the books analyzed, I found the trend to be that most important aspects of friendship were the same for both genders, with the differences that existed proving to be, on the whole, more superficial.

Differences

The differences that were observed were not unimportant, and they tended to be ones that were very much in line with stereotypical conceptions of male and female friendships. However, underneath these more petty differences, I found a large number of similarities, and these similarities represented the true foundations of these friendships. Many of the friendship qualities that were common to both teenage boys *and* girls were the very qualities that made these friendships so solid.

Emotional openness

One difference that was almost immediately evident between the two genders was the amount of emotional openness that friends felt comfortable displaying in front of one another. Girls showed a willingness to let their guard down in front of their friends, relying on them as a source of comfort in times of difficulty. For example, in *The Lonely Hearts Club*, the main character, Penny, finds herself telling a friend of hers, Diane, about a painful experience when she was betrayed by a boy:

I felt sharp prickles of moisture behind my eyes. Who would've thought that I would still have something in common with Diane? I felt lost, like her.

Diane looked at me with a mixture of surprise and sympathy. She quickly handed a tissue over to me. Before I knew what was happening, I was telling Diane all about Nate. I felt stupid, knowing that I'd only dated him for a few weeks, not a few years. But for some reason, I knew she would understand. (Eulberg, p. 52)

Penny feels comfortable sharing an upsetting story with Diane, and by the end of the telling, both girls are in tears, and unashamed of sharing their feelings with one another.

There are a couple of similar occasions in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Each of the four protagonists—Bridget, Carmen, Lena, and Tibby—experience their own sort of trial at some point in the book, and they immediately turn to the other girls to share their feelings of hurt and confusion. Bridget, who is upset after she has an affair with an older camp counselor at the soccer camp she attends in Mexico, writes to Lena saying, “I can’t sleep. I’m scared. I wish I could talk to you” (Brashares, p. 284). The girls rely on one another for help in understanding their own feelings—at one point in the summer, Carmen notes that “if she could get a look at herself through the eyes of her friends...she might have been able to examine her feelings” (p. 134-135), but without them she feels unable to engage in any sort of self-reflection or emotional understanding.

Girls in many of the books are unafraid of expressing their affection for their friends. In *Before I Fall*, in which Samantha Kingston is forced to relive the last day of her life over and over again, she takes the opportunity on one of her relived days to tell her best friend, Lindsay, that she loves her. Lindsay says, jokingly, “You know you love me” and Samantha replies earnestly, “I do love

you” (Oliver, p. 153). In *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, Gemma notes that she and her friends are “not afraid to grow close to each other” (Bray, p. 284), and in a letter to Tibby in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, Bridget says, “I’m glad my real life is not like this, full of people like me, ‘cause then I wouldn’t have you, would I?” (Brashares, p. 93). The girls feel at liberty to openly express their love for their friends, and do so repeatedly.

Boys, on the other hand, are fearful of sharing their emotions even with their close friends. In *Ostrich Boys*, the story of a group of boys coping with the death of one of their friends, narrator Blake says:

I’d never admitted to the others that I’d cried when I’d found out about his death, but no way did I think for one second that I was the only one who had. We claimed we were the closest friends in the whole world, yet there were certain things we couldn’t share—there was always a front to keep up. We’d stand shoulder to shoulder, no hesitation, fighting against the rest of the world. But the crying would always be done in private. (Gray, p. 58)

Despite the fact that the boys are experiencing a shared grief, the actual emotions that accompany that grief must be experienced in private. As the book continues, and the boys embark on a journey to take the ashes of Ross, their friend, to a town in Scotland that shares his name, the boys must come to terms with the fact that Ross had not been killed accidentally but instead committed suicide. At one point, one of the boys reflects that, “Maybe if we’d just bothered to tell Ross how we felt we probably wouldn’t be having to do all this” (p. 244). However, despite this realization of the possible consequences of their inability to express their feelings, later in the book when Blake and his friend Kenny have a falling out with Sim, the leader of the group, and split up from him on their trip, the two boys were still afraid to share the emotional fallout of this experience with one another. In the immediate aftermath of the fight as Blake and Kenny continue on without

Sim, Blake notes, “We didn’t talk much as we walked. He stayed a few paces behind. I knew he was crying and didn’t want him to feel embarrassed about it” (p. 283).

Another example of this type of emotional withholding can be found in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The book’s narrator, Junior, reflects about his best friend, Rowdy, “Nobody would miss me if I was gone. Well, Rowdy would miss me, but he’d never admit that he’d miss me. He’s way too tough for that kind of emotion” (Alexie, p. 16). Soon afterwards, when Junior is faced with breaking the news to Rowdy that he is transferring to a different school off the reservation where they live, he says, “I wanted to tell [Rowdy] that he was my best friend and I loved him like crazy, but boys didn’t say such things to other boys” (p. 48-49). At his new school, Junior makes friends with a boy named Gordy, but notes that “even the weird boys are afraid of their emotions” (p. 132).

Jasper Jones commences with Charlie being awoken in the middle of the night by the titular character, a local outcast, who, panicking, takes Charlie to see a dead body that he has discovered, hoping for his help. Charlie is horrified by the sight of the body, but even in such an extreme situation, he is still careful to guard his emotions, trying to ensure that his tears go unnoticed. He “[doesn’t] want to sniff otherwise Jasper will know [he’s] been crying” (Silvey, p. 41), ensuring that each boy experiences this grief alone. Later in the book, Charlie informs his best friend, Jeffrey, that he is “the best friend [he’ll] ever have” and that he is “like a brother” to him, prompting the following response from Jeffrey: “What? Why are you suddenly queer?” (p. 383). Any attempt to display genuine emotion is laughed off.

In book after book, it is noted how the boys are unwilling to discuss their feelings

with one another. In *Project Sweet Life*, narrator Dave notes about his friend Curtis and his love interest that he's "not sure what the exact history is between the two of them...because Curtis is not one to talk about his love life" (Hartinger, p. 87). In *Paper Covers Rock*, the story of a couple of boys at boarding school dealing with life after the accidental death of their friend, Alex, the narrator, reflects in an essay for his English teacher:

How do you ever know who you really are, when your society and world teach you to hide? You hide things every day, most of all your feelings, but you are conditioned to, especially if you are a boy. I remember the day when you asked us to write about the concealing paint we wore at pep rallies that liberated us into our savagery. Well, this reminds me of that because we are taught to wear masks that hide our true selves, which have the capacity for evil. (Hubbard, p. 141)

Boys in these books are not comfortable expressing their feelings with even their closest friends, particularly when these feelings involve their affection for those very friends.

In this sense, then, male and female friendships are clearly quite different, at least according to the evidence provided by these books. The female characters view their friends as an outlet for their emotions and are unafraid of expressing their affection for one another, while the male characters view their emotions as something to be hidden even from those closest to them. However, while this difference is certainly a significant one, the fact still remains that the friendships found in these books are still extremely close and supportive ones, despite the differing manners in which this supportiveness is expressed.

Resolution of arguments

Another noticeable difference between male and female friendships in this book is the manner in which disputes between friends are resolved. Overall, the boys are far more likely to resort to physical means of resolution, while the girls are more inclined to use

gossip and an intangible sort of social power in their disputes with one another.

Excellent examples of this can be found in *Gossip Girl*, the tale of social infighting and maneuvering on New York's Upper East Side. The story opens with the return from boarding school of the beautiful, fascinating Serena van der Woodsen, and the book chronicles the betrayals and backstabbing that occur between Serena and her best friend, Blair. Blair, who is jealous of Serena and bitter about Serena's lack of contact while she was at boarding school, uses her position as the leader of the social pack that she took over in Serena's absence to ensure that Serena is excluded from the social activities that the rest of her friends are taking part in. At lunch one day in the cafeteria, Serena asks about any upcoming social events:

Blair sat up straight and picked up her plastic cup, only to find there was no water left in it to drink. She knew she should tell Serena all about the *Kiss on the Lips* party and how Serena could help with the preparations and how fun it was all going to be. But somehow she couldn't bring herself to do it. Serena was out of it, all right. And Blair wanted her to stay that way. (Von Ziegesar, p. 61)

Blair does not openly acknowledge that she is angry with Serena, but instead utilizes more subtle methods to express her feelings. Over the weeks after Serena's return, Blair encourages the spread of rumors about Serena's time away, at one point in a mocking note to "Serena" that she instead sends to one of her other friends stating that "[she] hope[s] the VD gets better soon" (p. 56). The entire book involves the ongoing struggle between Serena and Blair, and yet not once do they actually acknowledge to one another that they are in a fight.

Similarly, in *Before I Fall*, on one of Samantha's relived-days, she ends up in a fight with Lindsay and her other friends, taking out her frustration about her unavoidable death on them. On their drive to school, she refers to Lindsay as a "walking STD farm"

(Oliver, p. 189), and mocks Elody's frequent binge drinking while also repeating some of Lindsay's frequent gossip about it: "*Look, Elody's trashed again. Hope she doesn't puke in my car, don't want the leather to smell like alcoholic*" (p. 192). Lindsay is so infuriated that she forces Sam to walk the rest of the way to school, and at lunch Samantha arrives in the cafeteria to find that none of the other girls are waiting for her at her usual table. In their world, standing someone up for a lunch date is a universally understood tactic of war.

In *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, a story of supernatural occurrences at an English girls' boarding school in the 1890s, sees newcomer Gemma Doyle jostling for a position within the highly structured social world of the Spence Academy. Felicity and Pippa are the queens of Spence, and they are initially wary of Gemma, and seek to intimidate her. Gemma, however, understands the importance of social power within this world, and battles back against them. Felicity, Pippa, and their friends drag Gemma out of bed in the middle of the night and demand that she steal the communion wine from the chapel as a sort of initiation, and after a moment's hesitation, Gemma agrees, reflecting, "I could still turn back and go to bed...but I'd forever yield what power I have now to those girls" (Bray, p. 76). The girls instead lock Gemma in the chapel; she manages to find a way to escape, and in revenge leaves the communion wine on Felicity's chair in the dining hall in an attempt to get her into trouble (p. 94). This constant jockeying for position occurs always beneath the veneer of happy smiles and polite conversation. Gemma eventually earns her in with the other girls when she observes Felicity kissing a gypsy boy on the school's grounds, a secret whose divulgence has the potential to ruin Felicity's reputation and her chances for marriage. As Gemma decides not to report Felicity's actions to the

headmistress, she reflects that “as delicious as it would be to watch Felicity squirm under Mrs. Nightwing’s interrogation, it’s better to know that she’ll owe her escape to my charity. That should be punishment enough for her” (p. 114). The battles that the girls at Spence engage in with one another always occur beneath the surface.

With boys, however, arguments are much more likely to be resolved physically. In *An Abundance of Katherines*, best friends Hassan and Colin are on a summer road trip that ends up involving an extended stay in Gutshot, Tennessee. After a couple of weeks in Gutshot, Colin and Hassan’s patience with one another is wearing thin, and one argument between the two boys is resolved in the following way:

And then Hassan reached out and grabbed a handful of Colin’s Jew-fro. He pulled Colin across the room by the hair, and then pushed him against the wall. Hassan’s jaw was clenched tight as he pressed into Colin’s solar plexus, the precise location of the hole in Colin’s gut. (Green, p. 130)

Similarly, in *Ostrich Boys*, when Sim learns that, before Ross’s death, Blake had taken up with his girlfriend, Sim immediately punches Blake, and then interrupts Blake’s attempts to explain himself by punching him again (Gray, p. 274). In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, when Rowdy is upset upon hearing that Junior is transferring to a new school, he punches him in the face (p. 52).

It is worth noting that while boys are quicker to resort to violence in their disputes with their friends, these conflicts are often more quickly resolved than those of the girls. While the arguments in *Gossip Girl* last the duration of the book, and the girls of *A Great and Terrible Beauty* continue their subtle warfare against one another, albeit to a lesser extent as time passes, Hassan and Colin’s argument proves to be short-lived, and while Kenny and Blake’s argument with Sim results in the end of their friendship with him, this result is immediate as opposed to drawn-out. Only the physical violence between Rowdy

and Junior fails to bring about an immediate result—indeed, the continued tension between them as Junior adapts to a life that increasingly takes place off the reservation is one of the main plotlines of the book. Overall, though, it is fair to say that when boys fight, it tends to be more short-lived and more physical, while girls have lengthier arguments that utilize slippery tools like gossip and social power.

Similarities

All in all, despite the noteworthy differences in male and female friendships, there were far more similarities that were evident. These similarities span a wide range of friendship behaviors and, furthermore, they seem to me to be very crucial elements of any friendship. While I do not wish to suggest that the differences I observed should be entirely dismissed, I still feel that both the quantity of and importance of the similarities to be discussed are noteworthy.

Defense against outsiders

The first broad similarity between male and female friendships is the willingness of friends to defend each other against perceived outsiders. No matter what tension or disputes exist within a friend group, these issues are instantly forgotten in the face of an outside threat.

In *I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You*, the spies-in-training at the Gallagher Academy are initially unimpressed by the arrival of Macey McHenry, an acerbic daughter of a senator. Early in Macey's stay at Gallagher, she makes fun of one of the other girls, prompting a strong reaction from her friends:

"Tell me," Macey said in the worst imitation Southern accent I've ever heard, "how can someone who's supposed to be so smart sound so stupid?"

Liz's pale face turned instantly red as tears came to the corners of her eyes. Before I knew what was happening, Bex had flown back from her seat, pinned

Macey's right arm behind her back with one hand, and grabbed that diamond nose ring with the other so fast that I said a quick prayer of thanks that the British are on our side (well, assuming we never revisit the Revolutionary War). (Carter, p. 56)

The other girls close ranks around Liz the instant an outsider attempts to mock her.

Similarly, later in the book one of the Gallagher girls is being taunted by some of the local boys who live in town, and Macey herself (now on friendly terms with the other girls) immediately swoops in to defend the girl, despite not having been especially close with her until this point (p. 232). Divisions within the group are considered insignificant in the face of outside threats.

In *The Lonely Hearts Club*, members of the titular club—which is founded by Penny as an attempt to value friendship instead of romance—are quick to defend each other against non-club members. One day at lunch, a freshman girl spills soda on Kara, one of the club members without apologizing, prompting Tracy, another club member, to demand, “Excuse me—what about apologizing to my friend who you just soaked?” When the girl proves unwilling to apologize, Tracy presses, “Yes, you just spilled your soda—*on my friend*. Do you understand what an apology means?” (Eulberg, p. 36).

In *The Goose Girl*, shy heroine Ani slowly begins to come out of her shell living amongst laborers when she is robbed of the crown that is rightfully hers. She befriends the bolder Enna, who encourages Ani’s growing confidence in herself and is protective of her in the face of anyone who tries to shoot her down. When Ani shares a story with the other workers and one of them claims not to get it, Enna is quick to leap to Ani’s defense: “‘Well, thanks be for that,’ said Enna, a protective hand on Ani’s shoulder. ‘If you had to get every story ever told we’d be in short supply’” (Hale, p. 164). Later in the book, when that same worker, Conrad, begins to suspect that Ani may not be what she seems, Enna

vehemently defends Ani and protects her secret, telling Conrad to “drop [his] ugly jealousies and eat [his] cold potato before [she] cram[s] it in [his] gullet” (p. 246). And, in *Before I Fall*, when Lindsay jokes about a girl she bullies possibly attacking her someday, her friends instantly leap to her defense, even in spite of the fact that Lindsay is obviously joking. Samantha says, “If you guys throw down I’m totally putting money on you,” and Elody adds, “Yeah, we’ve got your back” (Oliver, p. 42).

The boys show a similar willingness to defend their friends against outside threats. In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin gets into a fight with one of the local Gutshot boys, and Hassan instantly joins him in the fight: “Hassan looked at Colin. Together, they ran toward TOC, Hassan aiming for a body slam in the midsection and Colin going for a crazed punch in the head” (Green, p. 178). In *Ostrich Boys*, when a newcomer presents a perceived threat to the group, and Sim speaks rudely to him, Blake is prepared to defend him, and “[gets] ready to stand at his shoulder—no matter what” (Gray, p. 92). Later in the book, the boys take up with some girls, one of which turns out to have a boyfriend who eventually discovers the group of them, displeased to find his girlfriend in the company of three strange boys. When it looks like the boys might come to blows, “Kenny and [Blake are] there at Sim’s side” (p. 215). Despite the constant arguments the boys have over the course of their journey to dispose of Ross’ ashes, they instantly present a united front in the face of an outside threat.

Indeed, defense against outsiders is one of the defining characteristics of Junior and Rowdy’s friendship in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Early in the book, Junior notes, “Rowdy has protected me since we were born” (Alexie, p. 17). Rowdy is a bully and gets into fights with most of the kids on the reservation, and since

Junior was born with some physical problems due to being born with too much cerebrospinal fluid in his skull, Rowdy has spent their entire childhood defending him against would-be bullies. The new friends that Junior makes at the school he transfers too off the reservation show similarly loyalty. When a teacher criticizes Junior for missing too much school in the wake of his sister's death, his friend Gordy immediately comes to his defense, leading a walkout of the classroom (p. 175).

This defense against outsiders and loyalty to one's friends above all else is present even in the most serious of situations. In *Jasper Jones*, when Jasper solicits Charlie's help in hiding the body he discovers, fearful that he will be framed for the murder, he assures Charlie, "If you stick with me here, if you help me, nuthin is going to happen to you. At all. I mean that. If something happens, I'll do everything it takes to keep you clear, orright?" (Silvey, p. 29). And, *Paper Covers Rock* shows the manner in which such unfailing loyalty to one's friends can become twisted and cause resentment, as Alex feels duty-bound to Glenn not to inform any school authorities of the full details of what happened the day their friend died, despite wanting to. He questions Glenn's morals and behavior, even wonders if he might have purposefully delayed help arriving after Thomas drowned, but Alex sticks firm to his principles: "Glenn and I are friends, and you don't tell on your friends. It is the real Birch code of honor, the one students truly embrace, and we will follow it to the end" (Hubbard, p. 50). Regardless of gender, or motivations, or even of morality, the friends in these books stick together against all outsiders.

Sharing secrets

Another similarity that I observed in many of the friendships, both male and female, was the tendency to share secrets. I found this trend somewhat interesting,

because while I was unsurprised to observe it in the books featuring female friendships, I was somewhat taken aback to notice it among the boys, given the lack of emotional openness I also observed with them. However, I came to realize that sharing feelings and sharing secrets are not, in fact, the same thing. Both the boys and the girls shared the details of their lives with their friends, but, as was previously explained, only the girls discussed their feelings about those details. It's a fine distinction, but an important one.

In any case, secret-sharing is one of the most basic aspects of friendships of both genders. Upon Serena's return to New York in *Gossip Girl*, before realizing how angry Blair is with her, she is eager to talk to Blair about her time away and her feelings about being back:

Serena had wanted to tell Blair about Charles, the only Rastafarian at Hanover Academy, who'd asked her to elope with him to Jamaica. About Nicholas, the French college guy who never wore underwear and who'd chased her train in a tiny Fiat all the way from Paris to Milan. About smoking hash in Amsterdam and sleeping in a park with a bunch of drunk prostitutes because she forgot where she was staying. She wanted to tell Blair how much it sucked to find out that Hanover Academy wouldn't take her back senior year simply because she'd blown off the first few weeks of school. She wanted to tell Blair how scared she was to go back to Constance tomorrow because she hadn't exactly been studying hard in the last year and she felt so completely out of touch. (Von Ziegesar, p. 32)

Serena soon realizes that Blair is angry with her, and in exasperation says, "What's the deal? It's me, remember? We know everything about each other" (p. 35). It is noteworthy that shared secrets and knowledge of each other are the first thing that Serena calls upon to remind Blair of their past together—it is indicative of the significance of secrets to the foundation of their friendship.

The girls of *The Lonely Hearts Club* also share secrets with one another. At one club meeting, one of the girls, Amy, tells the others about losing her virginity to one of the boys at school, lamenting, "If only I could get those forty-five seconds of my life

back” (Eulberg, p. 104). Later, when another one of the girls, Morgan, returns from a first date, “the entire group await[s] the details” of her date and Morgan gives them a play-by-play (p. 209). In *The Goose Girl*, Ani and Enna share secrets, too. Each girl possesses her own sort of affinity for natural elements, something that they are unwilling to discuss with other people, and yet something which they feel comfortable telling one another about. Enna asks Ani, “Don’t you ever feel like fire is a friendly thing? That it’s signaling to you with its flames, offering something?” (Hale, p. 158) and Ani tells her, “I do kind of the same thing, you know, but with the wind” (p. 160). Enna tells Ani that she would have been hesitant to tell such a thing to her other friends, fearing that they would laugh at her—the fact that she is willing to share with Ani is a sign of the trust that she places in her. Ani, too, is willing to share her deepest secret with Enna—the fact that she is not, in fact, a goose girl, but rather a princess. Enna rushes to assure Ani that she can be trusted with this information, telling her, “I won’t tell anyone. You’ll see that I won’t” (p. 198). The trusting of a friend with such a deep secret is a sign of the greatest trust.

Time and time again, the girls in these books reinforce the idea that the sharing of secrets is one of the foundations of any friendship. In *Before I Fall*, Samantha reflects, “A good friend keeps your secrets for you. A best friend helps you keep your own secrets” (Oliver, p. 107). Felicity in *A Great and Terrible Beauty* asks Gemma, “Don’t friends always share secrets” (Bray, p. 117), and later in the book, the secret that Gemma and her friends share of their ability to access a supernatural realm “bands [them] together” (p. 261). A secret is one of the most basic ways of cementing a friendship in these books; without secrets, these friendships would not have their strength. Indeed, in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, when the girls return from their summers away from

each other, it is the absence of secrets that makes them feel almost uncertain. Carmen reflects:

In a way it scared me, having a summer of experiences and feelings that belonged to me alone. What happened in front of my friends felt real. What happened to me by myself felt partly dreamed, partly imagined, definitely shifted and warped by my own fears and wants. (Brashares, p. 293)

Secrets are such an important aspect of these girls' friendships that having some of them unshared makes their footing with one another feel uncertain. Furthermore, when girls choose *not* to tell one another a secret, it takes on greater significance for the omission. In *I'd Tell You I Love You But Then I'd Have to Kill You*, Cammie chooses not to tell her friends at school about a boy she meets on a training exercise, reflecting, "I kept it to myself--maybe because I didn't think it mattered, but probably because, in a place where everyone knew my story, it was nice to know there was a chapter that only I had read" (Carter, p. 91). The omission of secrets in a friendship is a significant enough event to cause a fair amount of reflection, which further proves how important secrets are to these friendships.

The boys, similarly, share secrets with one another. In *An Abundance of Katherines*, after Hassan kisses one of the local girls in Gutshot, he informs Colin of it immediately upon waking up the next morning (Green, p. 128). Despite Rowdy's general abrasiveness in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Junior still notes, "He only talks about his dreams with me. And I only talk about my dreams with him. I tell him about my fears" (Alexie, p. 23-24). Later, when Junior confides in him about a girl he is interested in, he asks Rowdy not to tell anyone else, and Rowdy asks, "Have I ever told anybody your secrets?" (p. 76). Rowdy is quick to pick fights, unwilling to discuss his feelings, eager to argue with even his best friend—and yet, he would never dream of

betraying Junior by revealing any of his secrets. He clearly treats it as one of the most important foundations of their entire friendship.

Alex from *Paper Covers Rock* reflects about the things he knows about Thomas, his friend who died: “I am the only one here who knows that Thomas lost his virginity to Kelly Somebody-or-Other, a girl he met at the beach on the Fourth of July” (Hubbard, p. 11). And, in *Ostrich Boys*, as the boys struggle with their friend Ross’ death, they reflect time and time again that *they*, not his family, knew him best. As Blake puts it at one point: “We knew everything about him” (Gray, p. 26). The boys in these books don’t necessarily want to discuss how they feel, but they still want their friends to know their deepest secrets, they still consider these secrets a sign of their trust for one another, and they pride themselves on knowing their friends better than anyone.

Friends are more important than romance

Another theme that is present in many of the male and female friendships in these books is the value placed on friendship at the expense of romance. The characters often express interest in members of the opposite sex, and some of the characters even develop relationships, but there is a continued emphasis on the importance of friendship above all else.

In *I’d Tell You I Love You But Then I’d Have to Kill You*, when Macey learns that Cammie has been sneaking around with a boy, she says, “I don’t see what’s so special about him that you’d risk losing what you’ve got” (Carter, p. 191). Macey is incapable of understanding the concept that a boy would be worth prioritizing over friends. Soon afterwards, her other friends begin to get upset about Cammie’s increasing interest in the boy, Josh:

"It's gone too far, Cammie," Liz said, shaking ingredients wildly into the mix until the whole thing started to bubble and change colors like something in a witch's cauldron. "You've gone too far."

"I've gone too far?" I said. "I wasn't the one blowing up Driver's Ed cars!"

"Hey," Liz snapped. "We thought he was a honeypot!"

"No." I shook my head. "We thought he was a boy." I gathered by things. "We thought he was worth it. And, you know what? He was?"

"Yeah," Liz called after me. "Well, I never thought you were someone who'd choose a boy over her friends!"

"Hey, cool it," Macey said.

"Well, I never thought I had friends who'd make me choose!" (Carter, p. 238)

The subtext here is that relationships with boys are acceptable so long as they don't lead to any sort of negative effect on friendships.

This sentiment is echoed in many of the other books, too. In *The Lonely Hearts Club*, Penny and Diane work hard to repair their friendship after Diane and her boyfriend break up. It is initially difficult for Penny to trust Diane again, because of Diane's behavior when she and her boyfriend first got together:

There was really only one person at McKinley who had a valid reason to hate Diane Monroe.

Me.

If it wasn't bad enough that she was a prime example of A Girl Who Gives Up Her Identity for a Guy, she'd also given *me* up. I'd always thought those girls who'd dump their friends whenever a guy showed interest in them were pathetic. But when I became one of those friends, I'd found out how much it hurt. (Eulberg, p. 33-34)

In Penny's world, there is no greater crime than to choose a boy over friends, and it takes quite a while for her to trust a friend who once betrayed her in such a fashion, complaining, "She thinks that now she's single, she can come running back to her good old friend Penny" (p. 44). While the two girls do manage to overcome their history and become close once again, this happens only once Diane acknowledges the mistake she made in placing too much value on a boyfriend:

I'm sorry that I threw our friendship away. I'm sorry that I treated you so poorly.

And, most of all, I'm sorry that it's taken me so long to come to my senses. I can't begin to imagine what it must've been like for you. (p. 50)

As the book goes on, Penny, Diane, and the other members of The Lonely Hearts Club time and time again emphasize the importance of friends, lamenting that “when [girls] *do* find someone [they] think is special, [they] forget about [their] friends” (p. 135).

The girls of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* feel similarly about the importance of friendship. At one point, Carmen says, “My mom tells me, ‘Just wait till you get serious about boys and school. Just wait till you start competing.’ But she's wrong. We won't let that happen to us” (Brashares, p. 7). Boys are interesting—but friends are more important.

Many of the boys feel the same way. In *Ostrich Boys*, Blake laments, “I couldn't believe that we'd stood shoulder to shoulder right up until girls got in the way” (Gray, p. 188). At one point in *Project Sweet Life*, Dave says:

I couldn't remember ever feeling so close to my two best friends. But now I felt even *closer*. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd ever feel this close to another person again I wanted to believe I'd feel it on the day I got married, if I ever got married. But I honestly wasn't sure I would. (Hartinger, p. 162)

In *The Raven Boys*, when Adam begins pursuing a local girl, Blue, Gansey is unsure of how to react to this change in Adam's attentions: “[Gansey's] eyes dropped to where Adam held Blue's hand. Again, his face was somehow puzzled by the fact of their hand-holding. Adam's grip tightened, although she didn't think he meant for it to” (Stiefvater, p. 222). Even the merest hint of romance is enough to throw a friendship off-balance, making the boys uncertain of what footing they're on with each other, wondering where they stand now. And, in *Paper Covers Rock*, Alex notes that he “will go down in the record books as agreeing to The Plan [to withhold information about the circumstances

surrounding Thomas' death] because friendship is more important than romance” (Hubbard, p. 70). The teacher who is investigating Alex and Glenn is young and female and Alex has reason to think she as interested in him as he is in her, but this is not enough to trump the basic principle regarding the importance of friendship.

According to the evidence from these books, the accepted truth that friendship is more important than romance applies to both boys and girls, and cases when romance takes precedence are not allowed to pass unnoticed. Friends are expected to be a priority in the lives of their other friends, and any instance in which this pecking order is not observed is one that requires addressing.

Friends more important than family

Another trend common to both the boys and the girls is the emphasis on the importance of friends over family. The teens in these books, regardless of gender, feel that, at this point in their lives, their friends are more important to them and know them better than their families.

At the end of *I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You*, Cammie is torn about whether to confess to Josh the truth about her life as a spy and the closeness of her relationship with the other girls: ““What do I have to say?” I snapped. ‘Do I have to tell you that my father’s dead, and my mom can’t cook, and that these girls are the closest thing I have to sisters?’” (Carter, p. 264). Living together at boarding school far from their families for the entire school year, the Gallagher girls have become a surrogate family for one another. At the beginning of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, as the girls shakily ponder a summer apart, Carmen says, “We are everything to one another. We don’t need to say so; it’s just true. Sometimes it seems like we’re so close we form

one single complete person rather than four separate ones” (Brashares, p. 7). This level of closeness must surely come at the expense of the other relationships in one’s life; these girls feel so close to one another, so connected, that they cannot help but value this relationship even above their relationships with their parents and siblings. Later in the book, when Carmen has had a falling out with her father, it is with Tibby that she feels she can finally let her emotions go:

Carmen really cried. She sobbed. She shuddered and heaved and gulped for breath like a four-year-old. Tibby put both arms around her, smelling and looking that comforting Tibby way, and Carmen was so relieved to be in a safe place with someone who knew her really, truly, that she let loose. She was the lost child in the department store, waiting until she was safe with her mother to cry a flood of tears. (p. 195)

Even the fact that Carmen uses the metaphor of a child crying with its mother shows the level of closeness she feels with her friends, that in times of turmoil with her own family it is her friends that she can rely on to love her unconditionally. Similarly, in *Before I Fall*, Lindsay tells the other girls, “You guys are my family. You know that, right?” (Oliver, p. 252). The assumption that the other girls already know this, that it goes without saying, just shows how fundamental this belief is to their friendship.

Such sentiments are evident in the case of the male friendships, too. In *Ostrich Boys*, Blake, Kenny and Sim express anger that they were not more included in Ross’ funeral, as they feel that they were closer to him than any of his family members. Blake reflects:

We were his best friends, we knew him better than anybody. When his parents were giving him hassle, when he got into trouble at school, when Sean Munro and the other morons were battering him, he came to us. Because we were his friends. We knew everything about him. (Gray, p. 26)

The boys value their friendship with one another above all else since, as Blake notes,

“Kenny, Sim, and Ross had always felt like my real family anyway. I’d chosen them as friends because I liked them, and they liked me. Nobody had allowed me to choose my family” (p. 64). In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Junior wonders, “Can your best friend be more important than your family?” (Alexie, p. 24), and when in *Jasper Jones* Charlie ponders running away from home, he realizes that “[he] dread[s] leaving [Jeffrey] behind more than [his] parents” (Silvey, p. 268). These friendships take precedence over everything else, including family—soon after meeting Gansey and his friends in *The Raven Boys*, Blue notes that the boys are “so comfortable with one another that they [allow] no one else to be comfortable with them” (Stiefvater, p. 140). There is no question about where the priorities lie in these friendships—it is friends first, then everyone else.

Ringleaders

Yet another trend that crosses gender lines is the frequent existence of a ringleader. While this is more common in the books featuring friend groups of three or more, even in pairs there is frequently one friend that holds power over the other one. This ringleader is the one who has the final say on the teens’ activities, the one the others want to impress, the one who holds the power.

In *Gossip Girl*, Serena’s former ringleader status is part of what makes her return to New York so unwelcome to Blair. On Serena’s first day back at school in Manhattan, Blair notices that other girls, out of habit, “[pause] for half a second to say hello to Serena, because ever since they [can] remember, to be seen talking to Serena van der Woodsen [is] to be seen” (Von Ziegesar, p. 85). She has historically been the one who controls the social agenda, and it is this status that Blair is unwilling to give up now that

she has returned. Similarly, in *Before I Fall*, Lindsay is unquestionably the leader of her pack. When reflecting on the beginning of her friendship with Lindsay, Samantha says, “Lindsay picked me out” (Oliver, p. 52). It is Lindsay who has the ability to make or break friendships. Later in the book, during one of Samantha’s relived days, when she tries to convince her friends to stay in for the night instead of going to a party, she, Ally, and Elody instinctively give the ultimate decision-making power to Lindsay since, as Samantha notes, “[Lindsay] has final say on all of our major decisions” (p. 150). Lindsay’s ringleader status is not merely used for bossing the other girls around; in fact, Samantha and the others take comfort from Lindsay’s position as leader. As Samantha puts it succinctly at one point, “She was Lindsay Edgcombe: she was our armor” (p. 251).

A similarly powerful position is held by Felicity in *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, and much energy is spent on the part of Gemma, Pippa, and Ann trying to curry favor with her. As soon as Gemma arrives at Spence, she can almost instantly discern who the leader of the pack is: “Even though the dark-haired girl [Pippa] is perfect and lovely, it’s the blonde [Felicity] who gets the attention of everyone in the room. She’s clearly the leader” (Bray, p. 47). For a while, Gemma tries to resist the lure of Felicity and Pippa’s clique, and yet she cannot help wanting to befriend Felicity despite herself, noting that Felicity’s “trying to win [Gemma] over with her charm” and that “it is working” (p. 134). Felicity herself is well aware of her position within the group, and expects total loyalty from the others. When Gemma refuses to befriend Felicity unless the unpopular Ann is allowed to join the clique too, Felicity agrees to this over the objections of the other girls because “she’d rather be seen with Ann...than admit defeat to her acolytes” (p. 136).

And, later, when Pippa questions one of Felicity's decisions, Felicity exacts revenge by cutting Pippa's rowboat loose into the lake. When Gemma chides her, saying, "That wasn't a very nice thing to do," Felicity responds with: "She needs to remember her place" (p. 225).

This hierarchy is present in some of the male friendships, too. In *Ostrich Boys*, Blake notes of Ross, "He got us together, didn't he? He was like a magnet pulling us together." (Gray, p. 228). In *Jasper Jones*, despite the terrible secret that binds Jasper and Charlie together, Charlie cannot help but be excited about this connection, about the chance to be included in Jasper's life, noting, "In spite of everything, it excites me a little to know I'll certainly be seeing him again. That he needs my help" (Silvey, p. 50). In *Paper Covers Rock*, Glenn is, as Alex phrases it, a Golden Boy (Hubbard, p. 5), and this gives him the power in his relationships with his peers and friends:

Glenn is the sort of guy other guys respect. For one reason, he doesn't make excuses for himself, but most of the time he doesn't need to: he earned a perfect score in math on the PSAT. Glenn is a top scholar and all-conference athlete. Glenn does not argue with adults as some students do; I think it's because he doesn't want to be involved with them. He is the most self-reliant guy I know; he does things his way, and that works out for him 99 percent of the time. He doesn't seek the spotlight, yet it finds him. Thomas wanted to be Glenn's best friend, but Glenn doesn't play those kinds of girl games. (p. 16)

Glenn's respected status gives him control in his friendships, and yet an important aspect of this in terms of male identity is the lack of emphasis Glenn places on this power. He earns respect and admiration wherever he goes; other boys want to be his best friend; and yet Glenn must pretend not to be aware of or interested in such social jockeying, believing that this is a feminine quality. In other words, boys may be ringleaders, but they must not revel in this status.

A particularly interesting example of the hierarchy of friendship and the tensions

this can create is found in *The Raven Boys*. In this book, Gansey is unquestionably the leader of the pack, with Adam, Ronan, and Noah following his lead in all matters. The hierarchy of the boys' friendship is something that all of them are aware of:

But Gansey was already grabbing the car keys to the Pig and stepping around his miniature Henrietta. Even though Ronan was snarling and Noah was sighing and Adam was hesitating, he didn't turn to verify that they were coming. He knew they were. In three different ways, he'd earned them all days or weeks or months before, and when it came to it, they'd all follow him anywhere. (Stiefvater, p. 51)

The tension that exists in the boys' friendships with one another mainly stems from Adam's resentment towards Gansey's status. However, it is worth noting that Adam is not resentful of Gansey's charisma, or his magnetism, or any of the undefinable qualities that make it immediately obvious that he is the leader of the pack in terms of their decision-making. Instead, the tension that comes from Adam's desire for equal status is strictly regarding matters of money. As Adam explains it to Blue, when telling her why he refuses to leave his abusive father and impoverished background and move in with Gansey and the others, "I need to be an equal, and I can't be, living here" (p. 299). Adam does not resent Gansey's leadership role in terms of personality; it is instead the idea of being a subordinate because of his poverty that makes Adam so bitter. This is an important distinction to make.

Among both girls and boys, then, their friendships involve an interesting power dynamic. The power wielded by the leaders of the friend groups in these books is significant, and this often results in jockeying among other members of the group for the attention of these ringleaders. This provides an interesting source of underlying tension and conflict throughout several of these titles.

Desire to impress

A trend that is somewhat related to the presence of a ringleader is the desire of friends to impress one another. This frequently involves members of a friend group competing to impress the leader of the pack, which is why these two trends can be seen as somewhat interconnected, and yet it is also worth noting that it is not just the leader of a group that friends want to impress—in truth, it’s any of their other friends.

At the beginning of *I’d Tell You I Love You But Then I’d Have To Kill You*, as the Gallagher girls return from their summer vacations, Cammie is feeling distinctly inferior about her entirely unglamorous summer, and resolves not to “leave [her] room until [she] could come up with a...story to match the international exploits of [her] classmates” (Carterp, p. 4). In *Before I Fall*, Samantha’s high school’s entire ritual of classmates sending roses to one another on Valentine’s Day seems designed to let girls show off in front of their friends. Samantha explains, “You can tell who’s popular and who isn’t by the number of roses they’re holding” (Oliver, p. 13). Samantha doesn’t care so much about the sentiments enclosed in the notes that accompany the roses as she does about ensuring that she doesn’t lose face in front of her friends.

The desire to impress is evident many times among Gemma and her friends in *A Great and Terrible Beauty*. From the moment she meets Felicity, Gemma is aware that “there’s something about [Felicity] that makes [Gemma] want to impress her, show her that [Gemma’s] a match for her strength and she can’t win [her] so easily” (Bray, p. 71). Gemma isn’t the only one with the desire to impress Felicity—one of the lesser members of Felicity’s clique is willing to trip Ann in full view of some of their teachers simply in the hope that her daring will earn Felicity’s approval (p. 55), and later in the book, when Gemma has earned Ann a spot in the group, Ann repeats a joke over and over again “until

it's gone from amusing to irritating" in the hopes of making Felicity and Pippa laugh for a moment (p. 139).

The boys are also driven by this impulse. In *Jasper Jones*, Charlie is often preoccupied with thoughts about how to impress Jasper, and makes decisions accordingly. When Jasper offers him a cigarette, Charlie is unsure of how to respond:

Wanting both to decline and impress, for some reason I decide to press my palms to my stomach and puff my cheeks when I wag my head at his offer, as if to suggest that I've smoked so many already this evening that I'm simply too full to take another. (Silvey, p. 4)

On another occasion, Jasper is drinking whiskey, and Charlie is again driven out of his comfort zone simply by his need to impress Jasper. He "take[s] an almighty swig" and then has "to wrestle every impulse to keep the fiery stuff in [his] stomach." However, he tries to play the entire incident off casually with a simple, "That's...better," even as he thinks, "Surely I'm not fooling anybody" (p. 176). Indeed, Charlie's desire to impress Jasper actually makes him appreciate the contrast of his relationship with his best friend, Jeffrey, even more: "It's always been so easy with Jeffrey. I've never felt the need to act stronger or smarter than I am. I've never had to try to be somebody else" (p. 287). His longstanding friendship with Jeffrey is a contrast to his new relationship with Jasper, and it is interesting that his desire to impress Jasper makes him value Jeffrey even more.

In the all-male environment of the Birch School in *Paper Covers Rock*, wanting to impress is a strong motivating force for the boys, occasionally with disastrous results. Alex admits that all the boys "act in front of [their] friends...at Birch like [they're] these big partiers when [they're] at home" out of a desire to impress one another; after his friend Thomas' death, Alex wonders "if Thomas had ever had a sip of vodka" before the day he died (Hubbard, p. 85). As this case shows, friends' desire to impress one another

can clearly be taken too far—indeed, the final jump that Thomas—who is already drunk—takes into the river comes at the urging of Glenn: “Double jump! I dare you!” (p. 63). Thomas’ desire not to lose face in front of his friends comes at the expense of his life. Even in less dire circumstances, boys are eager not to lose face among one another—as Blake observes about Kenny in *Ostrich Boys*, “He didn’t like me picking on him, and liked being labeled a whole bunch of chickens even less” (Gray, p. 76). This is less extreme than the case illustrated in *Paper Covers Rock*, and yet the same basic motivating factors are still there: a boy wanting to look good in front of his friends.

This desire to impress is interesting for the varying levels in which it can manifest itself. It can go from merely not enjoying being teased to actually putting oneself in danger to avoid losing face. For both boys and girls, then, while friends can clearly be a source of support, they don’t want to appear too vulnerable in front of those friends, either.

Jealousy

A further trend common to both genders that is somewhat related to both the need to impress and the presence of a ringleader within friendships is the presence of jealousy. While the causes of jealousy may vary—many of the girls, for example, are jealous regarding their friends’ appearances, while the jealousy that exists in male friendships tends to have more varied causes—its presence is widespread across almost all of the friendships in the books.

In *I’d Tell You I Love You, But Then I’d Have to Kill You*, Cammie is jealous of Macey as she integrates into the social world of Gallagher. Cammie is known for her ability to make herself invisible, and yet the arrival of Macey makes her suddenly regret

this particular skill of hers: “But now I was drifting deeper and deeper into the shadows until I was standing in the middle of my own room, watching my closest friends swarm around our gorgeous new guest, and I was completely invisible” (Carter, p. 60). In *Gossip Girl*, Blair’s jealousy of Serena is evident from the moment Serena returns to New York. Blair notes “how pretty Serena’s hair [is]. How perfect her skin [is]. How long and thin her legs [are]” (Von Ziegesar, p. 21). Blair almost instantly regrets Serena’s return, missing “how much easier it was to shine without Serena around” and laments that now Blair must return to “playing the smaller, fatter, mousier, less witty best friend of the blond uber-girl” (p. 21-22). Blair’s jealousy of Serena permeates almost every interaction she has with her—so much of her anger at Serena is tied up with her jealousy. In one instance, as Blair sees Serena cross the room, “watch[ing] the heads turn as she passe[s],” she realizes that “she [is] already sick of Serena and she [hasn’t] even spoken to her yet” (p. 119).

Similarly, in *The Lonely Hearts Club*, Penny notes how many girls at school dislike Diane without any firm reason for doing so. Penny is unsure of why exactly this is, saying, “Maybe it was her perfect appearance or the fact that she excelled in everything” (Eulberg, p. 33). And in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, despite how close the girls are to one another, they still have their moments of insecurity and jealousy. As the girls try on the magical traveling pants and find that they fit all of them, Carmen experience a brief fit of insecurity:

Suddenly Carmen was afraid that the pants that hugged each of her friends' bodies with loving grace would not fit over her upper thighs. She wasn't really chubby, but she had inherited her backside directly from the Puerto Rican half of the family. It was very nicely shaped, and most days she felt proud of it, but here with these pants and her three little-assed friends, she didn't feel like standing out as the big fatso. (Brashares, p. 17)

In *The Goose Girl*, Ani's childhood best friend and lady-in-waiting, Selia, allows her jealousy of Ani's position and power to poison their friendship. She tells Ani bitterly, "And there you were, with horses and tutors and gowns and servants, and all you did was hide in your room" (Hale, p. 64). And, when Ani first meets Enna, she initially "[feels] shamed by the girl's prettiness and confidence" (p. 133). Jealousy can exist over more petty matters, too—in *Before I Fall*, one of Samantha's friends gets more Valentine's Day roses than her, and she "feel[s] a momentary twinge of jealousy" (Oliver, p. 38).

In *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, the jealousy that exists among the girls often occurs as a result of jockeying for Felicity's favor. Pippa dislikes the developing friendship between Gemma and Felicity because she feels it is a threat to her own relationship with Felicity, and this jealousy manifests itself over and over again. At one point, as Felicity and Gemma are passing notes in class, Pippa notices their activity:

Pippa sees the surreptitious handing off of folded paper. She cranes her neck to see what's being written and whether it could possibly be about her. Felicity shields the content of the note with the wall of her hand. Reluctantly, Pippa goes back to her lessons but not without first glaring at me with those violet eyes. (Bray, p. 157)

Pippa is displeased at every little sign she sees of Gemma and Felicity's flourishing friendship, and Gemma in turn watches every indication of Felicity and Pippa's existing friendship with increasing jealousy. At one point, Gemma notes that she is "smarting" from "the fact that Felicity is wearing one of Pippa's new gloves while Pippa wears the other, like badges of their friendship" (p. 164). Gemma's jealousy manifests itself as pettiness occasionally, such as one moment when "Pippa is giggling so hard she snorts like a horse" when Gemma is "just horrible enough to take great pleasure in this fact" (p. 146).

The boys experience jealousy, too. At one point in *Jasper Jones* Jeffrey is the star of the local cricket team, and one of the girl watching the game squeals, “Jeffrey is amazing! I didn’t know he was so good!” Charlie responds, “Oh, he can play,” and notes that he feels “simultaneously proud and jealous” (Silvey, p. 236). In *Project Sweet Life*, Dave notes his jealousy due to his own lack of a love life compared to his friends: “It’s also possible I was jealous. Victor had his whole awkward thing with Lani, and Curtis had his thing with Haleigh. But I had nothing” (Hartinger, p. 88). In *The Raven Boys*, the jealousy tends to relate to the boys’ competing relationships with Gansey. At one point, Ronan confronts Gansey about his continuing quest in search of the grave of a mythical Welsh king: “‘Noah told me,’ Ronan said, ‘that if you left, Parrish was going with you.’” Gansey notes that Ronan “[has] let jealousy sneak into his voice” which in turn angers Gansey, who “trie[s] not to play favorites” (Stiefvater, p. 163). Later on, when Adam realizes that Gansey hasn’t shared a secret with Ronan that he’s been withholding from Adam, he “[feels] a cold bit of relief over this” (p. 276). By contrast, in *Paper Covers Rock*, Alex’s jealousy of Glenn has not so much to do with the dynamics of his friendship, but with Glenn’s entire life:

I wanted to be Glenn. I wanted his blond curly hair; I wanted his brain. I wanted his walk, his athleticism, his easy way with other guys. It wasn’t lust. I wanted his house on the golf course, his happy-looking family, his girlfriend with the thick brown hair. I wanted his whole history. (Hubbard, p. 69)

This jealousy is not specific to Glenn’s appearance, or his academic success, or anything—it encapsulates everything about him.

The jealousy present among the friends in these books shows the insecurity that the characters feel even in relation to their closest friends. They are still growing up, discovering their own identities, and they are jealous of the qualities in their friends that

they admire and that they feel are lacking in themselves. What exactly the jealousy is about is not terribly relevant—the fact of its existence among both the girls and the boys shows that it is a product of age rather than gender.

Kind when it counts

The final broad similarity that I observed among both the girl books and the boy books is the idea of kindness in crucial moments. Despite the jealousy and infighting among friends, and the teasing the characters endure at the hands of their friends, the friends can still rely on one another to be supportive in their times of greatest need, and it is this trust that allows these friendships to function healthily. It is noteworthy that in the book featuring the least healthy friendship, *Gossip Girl*, there is no evidence of this trend.

In *I'd Tell You I Love You But Then I'd Have to Kill You*, Cammie is insecure about the likelihood that Josh is interested in her romantically, and tells her friends, “I’m not the kind of girl guys like.” Bex immediately rushes to console her, saying, “Whatever! That guy should be so lucky,” and Cammie reflects, “I’d be lying if I said that didn’t make it better” (Carter, p. 117). In *The Lonely Hearts Club*, when Diane tells the other club members that she is going to quit the cheerleading squad and try out for the basketball team, the other girls “all [erupt] with words of encouragement” and Penny notes that she can “see Diane’s confidence growing as she [gets] the support” (Eulberg, p. 115). Later on, when Diane makes the team, the other girls are all waiting to celebrate with her, with Penny explaining, “Everybody wanted to be here for you” (p. 156).

The girls of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* are also there for each other in times of need. When a young girl that Tibby has befriended over the course of the summer is hospitalized due to her leukemia, Carmen is waiting for Tibby as she leaves

the hospital and insists on walking Tibby to work (Brashares, p. 259). And when Lena gets a letter from Bridget that alerts her to the fact that Bridget is going through a difficult time, she changes her plane ticket home from Greece and flies instead to Mexico to be with Bridget. When Bridget asks her, “Why did you come?” Lena responds, “I wanted you to know that you weren’t alone” (p. 289).

In *The Goose Girl*, Enna tells Ani that “the Forest grows ‘em loyal” (Hale, p. 296), and later when Ani is in danger, Enna comes rushing to her aid, explaining, “I was horror-struck just thinking that you were alone again, and after all I’d promised” (p. 371-372). Since Enna has promised Ani her loyalty and friendship, she is willing to do anything necessary to back up this promise. In *Before I Fall*, in a moment of honesty, Samantha tells Lindsay, “People would like you anyway, Lindz,” adding an unspoken “*If you stopped pretending so much*” that she is confident Lindsay understands. “We’d still love you no matter what,” she concludes (Oliver, p. 410). It is a rare moment of complete support for these girls—so many of their conversations throughout the book have involved teasing one another, or discussing insignificant things, and yet this expression of Samantha’s support for Lindsay serves as a reminder that she will back her up when it really counts. Similarly, despite the infighting and petty jealousies that characterize many moments of the girls’ friendships in *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, when Pippa is embarrassed in the aftermath of an epileptic seizure, her friends are quick to reassure her:

Pippa’s shoulders relax against the bow. Seconds later, a new worry has them knotted up again. “I didn’t...soil myself, did I?” She can barely say this.

“No, no!” Felicity and I say in a tumble.

“It’s shameful, isn’t it? My affliction.”

Felicity laces tiny flowers together into a crown. “It’s no more shameful than having a mother who’s a paid consort.”

“I’m sorry, Felicity. I shouldn’t have said that. Will you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. It’s only truth.” (Bray, p. 221)

The girls know each other's secrets, and sometimes even use this knowledge as weapons in their arguments, but when a friend is in genuine distress, they lay aside their squabbles and offer one another their support.

The boys show similar bursts of kindness, all the more notable for their rarity given the general lack of emotional openness to be found in the male friendships in these books. For example, at the beginning of *An Abundance of Katherines*, when Colin is disconsolate about having been dumped by his girlfriend, it is Hassan who works to convince their parents that the boys should be allowed to take a road trip. Hassan tells his father, "He's going with or without me, but with me at least I can watch out for him" (Green, p. 14). Throughout the book, Hassan is quick to mock Colin's history of dating Katherines and his distress each time one of them dumps him, and yet when the wound is the freshest, and he knows that Colin needs him, he is there for him. Similarly, in *An Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Junior and Rowdy's friendship frequently involves crudeness and mockery; however, Junior also knows that "Rowdy [doesn't] believe in himself" and for this reason periodically tries to "pump him up," telling him, "You're the toughest kid on the rez" (Alexie, p. 221). He and Rowdy are almost never openly kind to one another, and yet Junior is aware of moments when Rowdy needs his encouragement.

In *Jasper Jones*, Charlie and Jeffrey spend much of their time making fun of one another for everything from their lack of romantic experience to their taste in comic book action heroes. However, when Jeffrey tells Charlie that some of his family back in Vietnam have been killed, Charlie is instantly serious: "Jeffrey, that's horrible. When? Who? What happened? Jeffrey, that's horrible" (Silvey, p. 151). Charlie knows that this is

not a moment for jokes; this is a moment when his friend needs him, when he needs his support. And, in *Project Sweet Life*, when one of Curtis' plans falls through, his friends do not take this opportunity to mock him for his failure—as Dave notes, “After a disappointment like that, there was no way I was going to dump on him” (Hartinger, p. 65).

Despite the fact that many of the trends seen in the books—jealousy, gossiping, even physical fights—haven't cast these friendships in the most positive light, this final trend shows that underneath the surface arguments, friends are truly supportive of one another—and if they aren't (as in the case of *Gossip Girl*), then it probably wasn't much of a friendship to start with.

V. Conclusion

The final goal of this study was to determine the extent to which the friendships portrayed in these fourteen young adult novels reflect the reality of teenage friendships that is depicted in the scholarly literature. Many of these novels have been the recipients of popular and critical acclaim, and it's worth investigating the extent to which these works reflect the reality of the lives of the teenagers who will read them.

There were several similarities between fiction and reality. First of all, both the novels and the scholarly research emphasized the lack of emotional openness in male friendships, and the importance of emotional sharing to female friendships. In many of the scholarly articles that I read, this difference was the first one mentioned, to the point that it was treated as common knowledge in some cases. I was unsurprised to find that this trend was present in the novels as well; it is a common enough differentiation between the two genders that it would have been very surprising to find it absent in the novels, and would in fact have negatively impacted the authenticity of the characters' voices.

Another similarity between the novels and the scholarly research was the importance of loyalty to both males and females. The characters in books expressed this through two separate trends that I observed: the defense of a group member against outsiders, and the idea of being kind to friends when they need it. As I noted in my literature review, Azimitia, Ittel, & Radmacher (2005) found that teens consider trust and loyalty to be "important ideals of friendship" (p. 29). Fiction and reality also are aligned

when it comes to the case of friends as family. Scholarly research has found that friends serve as a source of support in the face of family conflicts, and that in certain cases friendship is very similar to kinship; similarly, in the novels I read, the characters often expressed – and struggled with – the idea that their friends were more important to them than their families.

All in all, however, I found more differences than similarities between the novels I read and the research. For example, researchers have found that male friendships are more likely to be hierarchical while female friendships are less hierarchical and more interconnected; however, I found both the male and female friend groups in the novels to often be extremely hierarchical, with a clear leader. The scholarly literature also supports the idea that males are narcissistic and wish to impress their friends, while females care more about supporting one another; however, in my reading I noted the desire to impress among both genders. Another difference is the emphasis in the scholarly literature on the shared activities that characterize male friendships; this is presented as the alternative to the emotional openness that characterizes female friendships. While the novels I read certainly emphasize the idea of emotional openness being present in female friendships and absent in male ones, the books failed to present activities as the alternative to self-disclosure. Males in the books spend a lot of time with their friends, but it is not always spent playing sports or video games, as some of the research suggests.

Another trend which is noted in the scholarly literature but absent in the novels is the idea that both genders form friendships based on similarities. I found no evidence of this in the books I read; indeed, reflecting on those books now with this trend in mind, I think that many of the friends in these books were quite different from one another. There

were also some trends I noted in the books that weren't present in the scholarly research, including jealousy (a prominent theme among both genders, but only fleetingly touched on in the articles I read), the importance of friendship at the expense of romance, differing methods of resolving arguments (in the books, conflict resolution takes very different forms, but the articles I read claimed that gender has no effect on conflict management), and secret-sharing. This last one is a rather interesting case—it is largely ignored by scholarly researchers, and I think it might tend to get lumped into emotional openness and sharing. However, in the books I read, these were two entirely different things. Girls in the books talked about their feelings and boys did not, but both genders shared secrets with their friends. The boys in the books were comfortable sharing secrets, so long as they didn't have to discuss the emotions that accompanied them.

What conclusions should be drawn from this study, then? This content analysis suggests that, in the world of young adult literature, gender does not have an enormous effect on friendship, despite the scholarly research that suggests otherwise. There are a large number of differences between the friendships depicted in these books and those found in the real world, and yet it should be acknowledged that many of these books are award-winners, and some of them are bestsellers. The implication, then, is that readers might not necessarily crave absolute realism within the pages of their fiction. On a personal level, I found all fourteen friendships to ring true within the context of their fictional universes, whether this resulted in a highly functioning friendship, or (in the case of *Gossip Girl*, mainly), utter betrayal. This is merely one individual opinion, obviously, but it begs the question: do readers value authenticity within a given context more than characters behaving in a manner that relates to the reader's own real-world

experiences? This is an entirely different question that would require a much more detailed investigation to answer, but I conclude this study intrigued by the possibilities for further research it suggests.

VI. Bibliography

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